

Potts-Fitzhugh House  
(Robert E. Lee House)  
607 Oronoco Street  
Alexandria  
Virginia

HABS No. VA-707

HABS  
VA  
7-ALEX,  
17-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

POTTS-FITZHUGH HOUSE  
(ROBERT E. LEE HOUSE)HABS  
VA  
7-ALEX,  
17-

Location: 607 Oronoco Street, Alexandria, Virginia

Present Owner: Lee-Jackson Memorial Foundation

Present Use: House museum

Statement of Significance: This structure was built contemporaneously with its twin next door at 609 Oronoco, later known as Hallowell School. Together these chaste Georgian buildings confer distinction to the block, a quality richly enhanced by old trees and flanking gardens. These two buildings are intimately associated with the youth of Robert E. Lee and his tutelage by Benjamin Hallowell for the U. S. Military Academy at West Point which he entered in 1825.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

## 1. Date of erection: 1795

The house was built by John Potts in 1795 on land purchased from Charles Alexander early in 1794. The date of construction or completion is attested by the gutterhead at the east bearing the numerals 1795. The next year Potts took out a fire insurance policy with the Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia to cover "My five Buildings on Oronoco Street at Alexandria now occupied by myself situated between the house of William Wilson and that on St. Asaph Street in the county of Fairfax." The accompanying plat describes the dwelling house as brick covered with wood shingles, 2 stories high and 55 feet by 25 feet. A long two-story brick ell was separately listed as well as an attached one-story brick smokehouse. Under proper lighting conditions the outline of this latter structure can be discerned. The brick office and stable have disappeared.

## 2. Architect: Unknown

## 3. Original and subsequent owners: John Potts was the first owner of the building. Potts and his wife, Eliza, deeded the property to William Fitzhugh in April of 1799 for \$12,000 subject to annual ground rent due Charles Alexander,

his heirs and assigns. (See Alexandria Deed Book M (Hustings), p. 162.) It has often been recited how Fitzhugh left his estate at Chatham, near Fredericksburg to escape from his friends and the abundant hospitality they seemed to expect, but it might be true that the newly-established capital exercised some appeal. In Alexandria, he could devote closer attention also to his large plantation at Ravensworth in Fairfax County.

William Fitzhugh died at Ravensworth in 1809 and the property descended to his only son, William Henry Fitzhugh. (See Alexandria Orphans' Court Will Book, C, p. 308.)

William H. Fitzhugh sold the property in 1820, to William Brent, Jr. of Stafford County (Alexandria Deed Book K-2, Circuit Court of the District of Columbia for the County of Alexandria, p. 234).

On December 7, 1824, the property was sold at public auction by the Marshal of the District of Columbia, under Writ issued by the Circuit Court of the District of Columbia for the County of Alexandria, to the Mechanics Bank of Alexandria (Alexandria Deed Book O-2, p. 231).

On April 20, 1839, trustees (named in a deed of trust executed by the Mechanics Bank on 31 October 1832) sold at public auction to Portia Hodgson, daughter of William Lee of Greenspring (Alexandria Deed Book Z-2, p. 267). Portia Hodgson resided on the premises previously and acquired title as the highest bidder on a settlement by trustees for the Mechanics Bank of Alexandria.

On June 3, 1841, William L. Hodgson, Cornelia L. Hodgson, Caroline O. Hodgson, and Julia A. Hodgson of Alexandria conveyed their 4/5ths share in this property to Sidney L. Hodgson of Loudoun County, this property having been allotted to him by the Loudoun Chancery Court in settling Portia's estate (Alexandria Deed Book A-3, p. 456).

On April 2, 1851, Sydney L. Hodgson of Loudoun County conveyed the property to William C. Yeaton of Alexandria (Alexandria Deed Book M-3, p. 313).

On December 14, 1883, Jarvis Mason of Philadelphia, trustee to whom Yeaton conveyed the property in a deed of trust dated 20 December 1877 (Alexandria Deed Book 6, p. 520) sold at public auction the property to Mary E. Fleming, widow of Robert F. Fleming (Alexandria Deed Book 13, p. 399).

On April 20, 1886, Mary E. Fleming of Washington, D. C.

conveyed the property to Emuella R. Burson, wife of John W. Burson of Alexandria (Alexandria Deed Book 17, p. 88).

On December 4, 1931, Emuella died, leaving the property to her two daughters, Mrs. Samuel A. Sizer and Mrs. William Chapman (Alexandria Will Book 5, p. 580).

On May 28, 1932, James Reese Duncan, Trustee, Martha Burson Chapman, widow, of Philadelphia and Anne Lee Sizer and Samuel A. Sizer, her husband of Tacoma, Washington conveyed the property to Royd R. Sayers and his wife Edna L. Sayers (Alexandria Deed Book 111, p. 155).

On November 26, 1941, Royd R. Sayers and his wife conveyed the property to Joseph B. Code (Alexandria Deed Book 182, p. 137).

On October 27, 1942, Joseph B. Code, unmarried, conveyed the property to Ada Hitchcock MacLeish (Alexandria Deed Book 195, p. 278).

On August 20, 1945, Ada Hitchcock MacLeish and Archibald MacLeish, her husband, conveyed the property to Josephine Underwood Goodale (Alexandria Deed Book 219, p. 147).

On June 1, 1962, Josephine Underwood Goodale, widow, conveyed the property to Henry Koch (Alexandria Deed Book 554, p. 557).

On January 11, 1967, Henry Koch and Virginia G. Koch conveyed the property to the Stonewall Jackson Memorial, Inc. (Alexandria Deed Book 662, p. 157) later the Lee-Jackson Memorial Foundation on the 160th birthday of Robert E. Lee.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

The first owner of the house, John Potts, was associated with George Washington in the Potomac Navigation Co. and there is evidence that they shared a great deal more than strictly business interests. The Potts family frequently enjoyed the hospitality of Mount Vernon and at least on one occasion the Washingtons were guests of Mr. Potts in Alexandria. Potts was an iron master and reputedly actively engaged in foundry operations at Falls Church and in the vicinity of Harpers Ferry. One can therefore attach special significance to the handsome cast iron fireplace lining located in the master bedroom at the west end of the house and hazard an attribution to Potts as the maker.

The second occupant of this house, William Fitzhugh, was a

lifelong friend and associate of George Washington. He served as first president of the Washington Society, organized in Alexandria in 1800, and was chairman of the committee in charge of the first Washington's Birthday Parade that year. To his house came George Washington Parke Custis, Mrs. Washington's grandson and the General's ward, to court Fitzhugh's daughter, Mary Lee Fitzhugh. The couple was married beneath the arch in the hall in 1804 and strangely as fate unfolds in 1831, they became the in-laws of Robert E. Lee when he married.

At the time William Henry Fitzhugh owned the house, it was occupied twice by General Henry (Lighthorse Harry) Lee and his family. William Henry Fitzhugh's policy dated July 25, 1815, also with the Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia, is important in indicating the occupant at that time was General Henry Lee's family.

Robert E. Lee, General Henry Lee's son by his second wife, Anne Hill Carter of Shirley, was born at Stratford in 1807. The Lees moved to Alexandria in 1810. The Alexandria Land and Personal Property Tax Assessment records (1810-1828) indicate that the Lees lived at 607 Oronoco Street twice and that their residence in the house was not continuous. It is, therefore, understandable how confusion has arisen as to just when and how long the Lees occupied the houses in Alexandria which have been associated with them. To summarize, they lived for one year at 611 Cameron Street, then moved to 607 Oronoco Street, a more commodious house, sometime after 1811. In 1817, the Henry Lee family moved to 407 N. Washington Street (Charles Lee House) but in 1821 they moved back to 607 Oronoco where they remained through the spring of 1825.

Despondent and in failing health Lighthorse Harry Lee left for a visit to the West Indies in 1813 and never returned. He died in Georgia in 1818 en route home. Ethel Armes in Stratford Hall: The Great House of the Lees (Richmond, Va.: Garrett and Massie, Inc., 1936) tells how he endeavored to get a passport to return to the United States in 1814, but was prevented by the blockade of the coast. In citing General Henry Lee as living in the house in 1815, William H. Fitzhugh probably labored under the impression that he would be returning in the near future. Robert, as a lad of seventeen years, was probably present when Lafayette called on his mother on October 14, 1824, to pay respects to the widow of his former comrade-in-arms. Since that day the West Parlor where he was received has been known as the "Lafayette Room."

The third owner of the house, Portia Hodgson, was the daughter of William Lee of "Greenspring." Lee was one of the first American envoys abroad during the Revolution. She had mar-

ried an Englishman, William Hodgson, who was an intimate of the family in London. Hodgson was a successful Alexandria merchant who owned the house at 207 Prince Street.

Lee family letters written by Portia Hodgson and her sister, Cornelia Lee, about 1799 and 1800 shed interesting sidelights upon the social circle in which they moved, including the Pottses and the Fitzhughs. "At Mr. F's." Cornelia wrote, "there was dancing and a very handsome Supper."

C. Sources of Information:

1. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources: Alexandria Deed Books M (Hustings), p. 162; K, No. 2, p. 234; M, No. 2, p. 343; O, No. 2, p. 231; Z, No. 2, p. 236; A, No. 3, p. 456; M, No. 3, p. 313; Deed Book 6, p. 520; 13, p. 399. Alexandria Land and Personal Property Tax Assessments (1810-1828), in the Virginia State Library; Fairfax Deed Book, February 18, 1794; Lee Family Correspondence, 1799-1816, privately owned; Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia, microfilm records in the Alexandria Public Library; Potomac Company Records, in the National Archives.

- b. Secondary and published sources:

Alexandria Association, Our Town 1749-1865, Likenesses of This Place & Its People from Life by Artists Known and Unknown (Richmond: Dietz Printing Co., 1956).

Fitzpatrick, John C., ed. The Diaries of George Washington, 1784-1799. Published for the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925). 4 vols.

Hollowell, Benjamin. Autobiography (Philadelphia: Friends' Book Association, 1883).

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Deering Davis, Stephen P. Dorsey and Ralph Cole Hall in Alexandria Houses, 1750-1830 (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., Inc., 1946) comment on the dual composition of 607 and 609 Oronoco Street in this manner: "Both houses are distinctive for

their widely spaced windows, dentiled cornices and long gabled roofs with only two dormers each separated by small classic pediments which are pierced by oval lights. The slightly projecting central portions of the facades topped by the pediments carry the entrance doors. Windows are accented by keystones and lintels of white stone. The scale is delicate and while it preserves certain mid-Georgian features, it shows a marked sympathy for the Federal style."

2. Condition of fabric: Excellent; well maintained in near-original condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Two-and-a-half stories plus cellar. Center block approximately 55' x 25' plus long contemporary ell (approximately 50' x 22' also two-and-a-half stories in height, but not approaching same ample scale or quality).
2. Foundations: Rubble to grade or just above in front building. Floor level approximately at grade in ell.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: Brick, Flemish bond in front facade, common bond elsewhere. Stone trim employed in north (garden front) and south (street front) only. Quarter-round moulded brick at water table.
4. Porch, stoops, bulkhead: Nineteenth century porch shown in HABS 1936 photograph and in The White Pine Architectural Monograph Series (Vol. XII, No. 4, 1926, plate CX), was removed a few years ago. This permitted restoration of the original bulkhead entrance to the basement. The steps to the basement, under the main stairway, are obviously not original.
5. Chimneys: The Potts-Fitzhugh House shares a large chimney with the Benjamin Hallowell House centered on ridge. At the east end rises a narrow version in the comparable position. A similar narrow stack serves the ell and is approximately centered on the rear wall of the northeast rooms. A large square chimney centered on the ridge of the ell in alignment with the original kitchen and the room beyond, probably the laundry.
6. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Fine pedimented doorway faces south. It has pilasters with stopped fluting and a

semicircular fanlight. There is an eight-panel door with corresponding recessed panels in jamb. Steps are of Aquia stone. At the strictly utilitarian level the board-and-batten doors in the service end of the ell appear to be original.

- b. Windows: Simple moulded wooden trim with few exceptions using six-over-six lights double hung sash. The exceptions are a pair of four-over-four windows in the east end of the attic, a six-over-three window in the gable of the rear stairhall and the use of four-over-four again in the gable end of the ell.

Windows of late nineteenth century vintage remain in the east end where they gave access to the porch and deck now removed. In the dining room a large round-headed leaded window appears as a forerunner of our so-called "picture window."

#### 7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The gable roof is now covered with slate but was originally wood. There is a pair of dormers on front, and a single dormer to light the northwest attic room. Ell has three dormers, one to eastward and two on west side, the latter having all exposed surfaces covered with slate.
- b. Cornice, eaves: A well-scaled modillion and fret cornice is a distinguishing feature of the front only. Elsewhere the roof trim consists of verge boards or boxed cornice with crown and bed mould.

The gutterhead proclaiming the 1795 date and ornamented with a pineapple motif is undoubtedly the best extant example in Alexandria.

#### C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: Wide central hall with principal rooms consisting of parlor to the left (Lafayette Room) and library to the right. The hall is extended in rear to provide a tower for a continuous stairway to the attic. Small hall rooms constituted the essential difference between the first floor plan and the upper stories. A short flight of steps leads off the hall and the library into the dining room, located in the ell, where there is an old kitchen and a modern one beyond. Overhead there is a similar arrangement leading from the bedroom used by Mrs. Lee to a small room over the dining room which was the bedroom of Robert E. Lee.



A narrow hallway runs the entire length of the ell on the second floor with an enclosed stair communicating with the kitchen below and the attic above. Behind Lee's room are three small rooms, one now a bath. The attic of the ell is divided into four small rooms.

2. Wall and ceiling finish: Of special interest and distinction are the plaster cornices throughout the main house and the rosettes downstairs. The frieze in the hall, the Adamesque medallions, and the cornice in the library compare favorably with similar workmanship at the Octagon, Washington, D. C.

All attic rooms also are lathed and plastered. The dining room is papered.

3. Doorways and doors: Six-panel doors in principal rooms, with sunken panels. Board-and-batten doors in attic rooms.
4. Special decorative features, trim, cabinet work: Sunken paneling is characteristic of the wainscoting used in the hall and library. The use of chair rails is rather consistent throughout, even across the ends of the attic rooms in the main portion of the house and where missing, as in the parlor (Lafayette Room), there remains the ghost of the trace. Cupboards are roomy and liberally placed in the major bedrooms and the dining room. The folding inside shutters in the Lafayette Room and the library are enriched with applied mouldings and this same treatment is accorded the fasciae and soffits of the stair. Indeed the stairway, with its turned balusters and terminal scrolls, framed behind the elliptical arch, is an arresting feature of the house.

We are told that the two original mantels for the formal rooms are missing, but the two above-stairs must be indicative of their quality. Worth citing is the Adam mantel in Mrs. Lee's bedroom replete with rich composition ornament and marble facing.

5. Hardware: A quantity of original hardware remains, running the gamut from the large brass box lock on the front door to the wrought-iron H hinges and box locks in the attics. Remnants of the signal call system for servants remain intact and four signal bells of different sizes still hang in the kitchen.

In the kitchen also was installed at some early period a patent bake oven marked "Stratton/73 Cheapside/London."

When it was placed the fireplace opening was apparently reduced in size to accommodate it to the chimney.

6. Mechanical equipment: Lighting: In the Lafayette Room hangs a handsome Waterford chandelier believed to have been acquired for that location by the Fitzhughs, about 1810.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces south along the north side of Oronoco Street and the integrity of the landscape and setting has been retained. The north end of the garden was cut off and leased to Woodward and Lothrop for a parking area by Mrs. Robert C. Goodale before the property was acquired by the Kochs. However its situation and privacy remain unimpaired.

The nature of the topography required retaining walls and the erection of concrete and masonry screens along the north and east confer seclusion. The attractive picket fence along the front probably post-dates 1926 since the photograph reproduced in the "White Pine Monograph" above-mentioned exhibits a more ordinary picket fence.

2. Historic landscape design: Mrs. Gay Montagne Moore in her Seaport in Virginia: George Washington's Alexandria (Richmond: Garrett and Massie, Inc., 1949), pp. 208-209, preserves an interesting tradition connecting General Lee and this house and garden. It merits quoting as follows:

General Lee always loved this house and after defeat he came back to Alexandria, which for some time had been in command of the Union forces, to take farewell of his family and friends and went again to look once more upon the scenes of his childhood. The story is told that people next door were startled to see a man peeping over the wall. Upon investigation, it proved to be General Lee, who had climbed upon the wall to look into the garden. He apologized, saying, 'I just wanted to see if the snowballs were in bloom.'

To this day the garden, as the house, retains its integrity. All the growing things associated with old gardens are there -- the lilacs, boxwood, magnolias, lemon trees, iris, syringa, lilies, jonquils, jasmine, honeysuckle -- and General Lee's remembered snowballs.

3. Outbuildings: A nineteenth century garden feature strongly suggesting a cupola is reportedly the old police traffic control box which stood for many years at 14th Street and New York Avenue, Washington, D. C.

The insurance policy which William Fitzhugh took out in 1805 for 607 Oronoco Street fixes the location of the outbuildings. The Office was on the street about 10 feet from the house. The Stable was about 45 feet distant and 36 feet away from the house.

Prepared by Worth Bailey, Consultant for  
The Historic Alexandria  
Foundation  
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Edited by  
Antoinette J. Lee  
November 1975

#### PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was a cooperative effort of the Historic Alexandria Foundation and the Historic American Buildings Survey to document some of the most important early Alexandria residences for the HABS collection. The historian was Worth Bailey, an Alexandria resident and former HABS employee. Photographs were supplied by Victor Amato. The material was edited in 1975 by Antoinette J. Lee, working on contract for HABS.